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ABSTRACT

A basic introduction to the history and culture of Haiti is presented. It is designed primarily for American service providers and sponsors and so also discusses the legal problems faced by Haitian entrants in the United States. The information is organized according to the following topics: (1) geography and climate of Haiti, (2) history, (3) economy, (4) education, (5) social structure, (6) family life, (7) religious beliefs and funeral customs, (8) health services, (9) mental health, (10) foods, (11) holidays, (12) recreation, (13) transportation, and (14) implications for social adjustment. A bibliography concludes the volume. (AMH)

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The People and Culture of Haiti

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Preface

This booklet is a basic introduction to the history and culture of Haiti, and the problems faced by Haitian entrants in the United States. It is designed primarily for American service providers and sponsors.

Many people contributed to this guide. Dr. Yves Dejean of Bank Street College of Education in New York provided valuable insights and recommendations. His help is deeply appreciated by the staff of the Language and Orientation Resource Center.

We are also grateful to Office of Refugee Resettlement staff members Kenneth Leutbecker, Denise Blackburn, and particularly, Kathy Do, LORC'S Project Officer.

I. Introduction

Haitian emigrants have come to the United States since the 1920's, but it wasn't until the sudden influx of Haitian "boat people," and the simultaneous arrival of Cubans from Mariel, that public attention was drawn to the plight of Haitians seeking asylum in the United States.

The vast exodus of Cubans and Haitians to the U.S. in the spring of 1980 forced the U.S. government to develop a policy regarding refugees who do not go through regular channels for admission to the United States. The legal status of Haitians depends on the time they landed in the U.S.;

- Haitians who arrived before October 10, 1980 and who appeared before the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), were classified as "entrants (status pending)." The "entrant" classification was created for the Cuban and Haitian arrivals because of the abrupt circumstances of their arrival and question regarding their reasons for coming to the United States. These people have not yet been given refugee status, although they are issued I-94 cards and are permitted to work in this country. Final decision of their legal status must be made by the U.S. Congress.

- Haitians who arrived and appeared before INS between October 10,1980 and June 6, 1981 were granted exclusionary hearing on a case-by-case basis and were resettled pending hearing by INS.

- Haitians who arrived and appeared before INS after June 6, 1981 are now in detention camps in the U.S. except those resettled for humanitarian reasons, such as children and pregnant women.

The Haitian entrant who has an I-94 may qualify for the following assistance:

- Supplemental Security Income (SSI - for the elderly and handicapped), Medicaid and Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC).

- Emergency assistance under the rules of the states in which they are residing (under usual Federal-State matching fund provisions). Specific benefits may vary considerably from state to state.
- Minor children are removed from the camps and placed either with relatives or state child welfare systems. They are eligible for social and educational services.

As of May, 1982, Congress has not finalized the Haitian's legal status. Legislation is pending that would establish which Haitians could eventually apply for permanent resident status and whether others would be excluded (sent back to Haiti).

Almost 40,000 Haitian entrants are registered with INS. According to the U.S. Office of Refugee Ressettlement, about 70% of them are male; less than 10% are under 18 years of age; and over half are in the 18-29 age group. Before coming to the United States, the majority of the Haitian boat people worked as farmers, fishermen, carpenters, tailors, dressmakers, domestics, mechanics, and welders.

The recent arrivals are very different from the students and professionals who came to the U.S. in the 1950's and 60's.

II. Geography & Climate

Haiti lies approximately 700 miles southeast of Florida, between the islands of Cuba, Jamaica and Puerto Rico. It comprises the western third of an island called "Hispaniola" by the Spaniards and "St. Domingue" by the French during colonial days; the remainder of the island is occupied by the Dominican Republic.

Haiti is about the size of Maryland (10,000 square miles) and has a rugged terrain. In the language of the Indians, the first island inhabitants, the word Haiti means "country of mountains or highlands." The temperature varies from 85-95^{o} F in the coastal lowlands to 65-70^{o} in the interior

highlands. There are two rainy seasons, occurring from April to June, and August to mid-November. Rainfall may range from 10 to 100 inches per year.

III. History

The island was discovered by Columbus in 1492. The Europeans found the country to be populated by the Taino, Carib and Indian tribes. They quickly enslaved the native Indians and began exporting goods such as gold, silver, indigo, sugar, and other items to Spain. The Indians, unaccustomed to forced labor and not immune to European diseases, died by the thousands.

Within 50 years of colonization, the entire local Indian population of approximately 200,000 was decimated. The Spaniards therefore replaced their workers with another group: the Africans. They were brought as slaves to Hispaniola, and came from remote regions of the Congo, Senegal, Ivory Coast, and Benin in West Africa.

In the 1620's, the French established small military outposts on a nearby island, which was already populated with pirates of all nationalities and slaves that these pirates had taken from the Spaniards. In a few years, the French began challenging Spanish authority over Hispaniola, eventually occupying major areas of the country.

Under the terms of a treaty in 1697, Spain discontinued claims on the western portion of Hispaniola while retaining the Eastern sector, known today as the Dominican Republic.

The French continued the slave-based economy, and in the 1780's the island, now called St. Domingue, produced two-thirds of the French gross national product.

By 1790, news of the 1789 French revolution spread throughout the colony and the slaves began their own rebellion. Their leader, Toussaint L'ouverture, organized an efficient guerilla force and by 1795 was in full control of St. Domingue, including the Spanish sector.

In 1802, Napolean recaptured the colony and Toussaint L'ouverture and his family were exiled to France.

Once the French regained control of the island, they reinstituted the system of slavery. However, one of Toussaint's lieutenants, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, organized another guerilla army, and on January 1, 1804, the victorious revolutionary army adopted the Indian word Haiti as the official name of the newly-independent country. Haiti thus became the only nation in modern history formed by a revolution of slaves.

During the ensuing years, Haiti experienced a series of unstable governments. In 1915, President Woodrow Wilson determined that it was in the best interest of the United States to send Marines to Haiti to restore a stable government. The American occupation lasted nineteen years until 1934, when troops were withdrawn. After the American withdrawal, a number of governments ruled Haiti. Some came to power through free but questionable electoral processes, other through military takeovers.

On September 22, 1957, Dr. Francois Duvalier ("Papa Doc") became President of Haiti Under Papa Doc's regime, a state of seige existed throughout the country and opponents of the government were either imprisoned or killed. Members of the armed forces and Duvalier's personal militia ("Toutons Macoutes") were permitted to eliminate dissidents by whatever means available. Duvalier's original term of office expired in 1963, but he extended his mandate for life. Thus, Dr. Duvalier continued to rule until his death in 1971. His son, Jean-Claude Duvalier ("Baby Doc") succeeded his father as President-for-Life.

"Baby Doc" Duvalier's regime has been less brutal than his father's, although some observers maintain that political oppression continues. Debate continues in Congress and in involved U.S. government agencies whether Haitians come to the U.S. for political asylum or for greater economic opportunity.

IV. Economy

Haiti is one of the poorest nations in the Western hemisphere. The Haitian economy is controlled by the upper class, a very small part of the

population which earns over 50% of the country's income. Sixty percent of Haitians are unemployed, and the per capita income is less than $260/year. The island has no known natural resources, other than bauxite which is mined for export by the American-owned Reynolds Company. The Haitian government has emphasized the need to expand agricultural production in order to sustain the economy. Forests have been depleted, however, to accommodate the charcoal and home construction industries, hampering agricultural development and creating a bigger problem, land erosion. Since past wide-scale reforestation programs have failed, Haiti has been losing valuable topsoil at an alarming rate and a great portion of the country has become unsuitable for farming. This, in turn, has led to a large influx of people to urban areas in search of jobs, creating worsening overcrowding. Because of its limited size (10,000 square miles) and large population (up to 6 million inhabitants), Haiti is one of the most densely populated countries in the world.

Although agricultural output is very low in Haiti, the country nevertheless produces a number of food commodities. The major crops grown locally to supplement food imports are rice, corn, bananas, mangoes, avocados, and various other tropical fruits and vegetables. Coffee and sugar cane are also grown for domestic consumption and foreign export, as well as tobacco, cotton and a number of herbs and spices. The collapse of the world coffee market, however, has had disastrous effects on the Haitian economy. Other activities such as fishing and the raising of livestock, have the potential to improve Haiti's economy but are underdeveloped.

V. Education

The Haitian education system begins with kindergarten and continues through a thirteenth year in high school, although most Haitians are financially unable to attend school. French is the instructional language, and mandatory competitive examinations are required in the 12th and 13th grades; successful performances on the 13th grade examination enables the

student to attend college. High school programs are designed along subject track lines such as a science curriculum. A lecture format is used; subjects are covered on a prescribed schedule. Learning is primarily by rote and exact repetition; analysis or synthesis of information is not expected. Absolute obedience to the teacher is required.

Even though strong emphasis has been placed on French as the language of instruction, 85% of Haiti's population do not speak it because they could not attend school for financial reasons. Most Haitians speak only Creole, and only the smaller, educated class speaks French. This linguistic and intellectual gap within Haiti's social structure contributes to the great economic disparity among Haitians.

For further information concerning language and education in Haiti, please refer to CAL's Refugee Education Guide General Information Series #26: Teaching English to Haitians.

VI. Social Structure

Haitian society can be roughly divided into two classes: urban population and rural population. Each has a very small upper class, while the remainder of the population lives in varying degrees of poverty.

The cities of Haiti are growing rapidly as people migrate from the rural areas in search of employment. The unemployment rate is extremely high: over 40% in some cities. The upper class of each city, perhaps a few dozen individuals, consists of very rich industrialists. The "middle class" consists of government workers and teachers. This group is small in number, however, and is very poor by American standards. Elementary school teachers, for example, make less than $100 per month, and a worker making $300 per month is considered very successful.

The rural population, which is almost totally uneducated, does have a small number of rich and powerful landholders. Again, there is a poor "middle class" of people who own a very small piece of land. The majority of the population does not own land, is usually unable to find employment,

and is extremely impoverished by any standard imaginable.

The "elite" of Haiti consists of 200 millionaire families, followed by approximately 3000 families with incomes over $90,000 per year. There is a great gap between this elite and the middle class, whose earnings range from $1000 to $3000 per year.

The vast majority of the entrants in the U.S. are from the poverty-stricken rural areas. The upper-class Haitians who wish to come to the U.S. are usually able to arrange to do so legally as visitors or immigrants and do not experience the same legal and social problems faced by entrants.

VII. Family Life

Haitian society places great importance to family life. Extended family members are considered part of the family unity and it is not unusual for children, parents, and grandparents to share a house or at least live close to each other. Family members tend ot be very supportive of each other and inter-generational conflicts are rare.

Parents generally share household duties and financial responsibilities; both husband and wife often work outside the home. Because of the widespread poverty among Haitians, children from less affluent families are often forced to work rather than attend school.

There is a form of common-law marriage called "placage" which does not require a license or church ceremony but is fully accepted by society. Placage is practiced by 85% of Haiti's population. Although Haiti's elite classes openly disapprove of the practice, many of them have had children with mistresses and provide financial support for their offspring without living with the mistress.

A man or woman may have a number of placages during his/her lifetime. Children born as a result of these relationships will regard kin from earlier placages as brothers and sisters. Terms such as "illegitimate children" or "half-brothers/sisters" are not used to describe offspring from other common-law marriages that either parent has had. A child may

take either the father's or mother's last name if the parents separate. In many cases, children born in different placages live in the same household without conflict.

VIII. Religious Beliefs and Funeral Customs

Catholicism is the predominate religion in Haiti, but there are also a number of active fundamentalist Protestant churches. However, Voodoo is also practiced by the majority of the population.

To the outsider not familiar with Haitian culture, the word "Voodoo" carries the connotation of sorcery. This negative image can be partly attributed to the many movies depicting Voodoo religious practices as macabre. Thus the public perception of Voodoo beliefs and rituals has become distorted.

Voodoo is a blend of Western and African religious beliefs in which an almighty God plays a central role and is considered to be the ultimate benefactor. Benign spirits---Lwa---intercede for humans in the world of the dead and/or help the living in earthly matters. Several of the better know Lwa are:

- DANMBALA-WEDO, the serpent spirit. He is considered to be of great age and very sacred;
- LEGBA, chief spirit of all rituals; and
- GEDE, a family of spirits of death. BAWON SAMDI is a lesser Lwa in the Gede family.

Upper-class Haitians follow Western customs in burying their dead. Black attire is worn, and the casket is left open at the funeral so that family and friends may pay tribute to the deceased. A three-day wake usually takes place before the burial.

Members of Haiti's peasant class adhere to a more traditional African custom. White clothing which symbolizes death and evil events is worn. A three-day wake also takes place with plenty of music, alcohol, and food. A Christian minister or priest generally carries out the funeral rites

after a Voodoo priest or priestess has held appropriate rituals in private.

IX. Health Services

In theory, health services are generally available free of charge to all Haitians through public clinics or hospitals. However, because of the lack of hospital facilities in the countryside (where 80% of Haiti's population resides), it is virtually impossible for most people to receive medical attention. The few functioning public hospitals are located in the five major cities (Port-au-Prince, Cap-Hatien, Jacmel, Jeremie, Cayes) and are usually overcrowded and under-staffed. In addition, there is a shortage of trained medical doctors and technicians because of the heavy emigration of the best members of these professions. The remaining qualified doctors are found in the capital (Port-au-Prince), where they cater to the needs of upper-class Haitians who can afford to pay for medical services.

People who live in the countryside therefore turn to Voodoo priests or priestesses, many of whom use herbal medicines for treatment of numerous ailments ranging from the common cold to life-threatening diseases.

The lack of an adequate health services system has had disastrous consequences for the populace. Haiti has one of the highest infant mortality rates in the world; the average life span is only about 49 years. Some of the Haitian entrants have been found by U.S. Public Health specialists to suffer from malnutrition, venereal-type disease, tuberculosis, intestinal parasites or tetanus. All the entrants have been examined, however, and those with communicable diseases have been treated before being released from U.S. government facilities.

X. Mental Health

While Western mental health concepts and practices exist in Haiti, the influence of Voodoo religious beliefs play a significant role in any

psychiatric evaluation of what is and is not considered aberrant behavior.

The possession of an individual by a Voodoo spirit during a religious ritual is thought to be a normal part of the ritual. Trance-like behavior and use of unusual speech patterns are accepted. Continued possession after the end of a religious ritual, however, is not regarded as normal.

Since the early 1970's, mental health practitioners at Haiti's psychiatric institute have worked closely and successfully with Voodoo priests and priestesses in providing treatment to some mentally ill patients.

XI. Foods

As few towns and villages have electricity, refrigeration is not common. As a result, food is usually purchased fresh daily from vendors in various local markets. Rice and beans are the main part of the daily diet, and chicken, goat, beef, pork, and fish are consumed when available. Fruits such as mangoes, watermelons, oranges, bananas and pineapples are considered delicacies.

Haiti has the second-lowest per capita caloric intake in the world, so malnutrition is widespread, particularly among the poverty classes. The meats and fruits that are available are consumed primarily by the upper and middle classes.

Food is cooked on stoves similar to wood stoves, but using charcoal as the fuel; open charcoal pits are also common.

XII. Holidays

The major holidays that are celebrated in Haiti are the following:

- Feast of the Dead (All Saints Day) on November 1 and All Souls' Day on November 2;
- Remembrance of the assassination of Haiti's independence leader, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, October 17;

- Independence Day, on January 1.

Christmas and Easter are also celebrated. A three-day carnival, which usually takes place every year at the end of February, presents an excellent opportunity for multi-cultural activities. Members of Haiti's upper classes can be seen dancing in the streets during this Mardi-gras, mingling freely with the masses.

XIII. Recreation

Haitians take part in a wide range of recreational activities. Soccer is the national pastime, and cock fights are also popular. Dominoes, checkers and cards are popular games. Dancing usually takes place in a structured social or religious setting.

XIV. Transportation

While cars are common in Haiti, bicycles and motorcycles are also used as a means of transportation. In rural areas with fewer roads, horses and mules are used for transporting people as well as goods. In the main cities, small converted pickup trucks with benches in the flat beds form a popular public transportation system. These taxis are called "tap-taps."

A highway system connects the five major cities and busses are used for long distance travel.

XV. Implication for Social Adjustment

Certainly the most crucial barrier to the Haitian entrants' adjustment to life in the United States relates to the uncertainty regarding their legal status. As of this writing, controversy continues as to whether they can ever become permanent residents; those who arrived

after October 10, 1980 still face exclusion and return to Haiti, having been declared economic migrants rather than political refugees. For those remaining in the detention center, life is spent waiting for some decision to be made, a decision that will ultimately be made on the basis of the numerous court suits that are taking place, changing political and social philosophies and government policies. Entrants who spend a lengthy period of time in the detention centers may suffer many of the same effects found in Southeast Asian refugees: depression, feelings of hopelessness, more difficult adaptation to the U.S., and ambivalence towards the American government.

Many entrants whose status is still undetermined will hesitate to establish roots in the U.S. They may be less motivated to learn English or become a part of American society, feeling that such efforts are useless if they will be deported in the near future.

Because many Haitians enter the U.S. by boat without being apprehended by immigration officials, Americans sometimes assume that all Haitians are illegal immigrants and therefore may not work or receive benefits. This is not true of any Haitian who has been paroled pending exclusion hearings. (To determine if a Haitian has been paroled, ask to see his or her I-94, immigration identification card.) These entrants may legally work in the U.S., obtain social security numbers, receive services such as food stamps, attend schools, and any other services designed for refugees except rehabilitation programs like job training. The entrant, however, may be afraid to apply for such services for fear of exclusion, so the sponsor or service provider can help reassure the Haitian that applying for work and benefits does not entail any additional risk of exclusion.

A second factor influencing adjustment is the work orientation most Haitians possess when they come to the U.S. Because of the extreme poverty in Haiti, the entrant is eager to work and send money to family members left behind. This devotion to work and sending money to the family may slow adjustment in other areas. For example, some entrants will not

take ESL classes that disrupt their work schedules, so it is important that such classes be held at different times to accommodate these schedules. In addition, the entrant's eagerness to work may lead to his or her being victimized by an unscrupulous employer, so the sponsor or service provider may need to intervene in unfair or illegal work situations.

Like many other immigrant and refugee groups, Haitians find limited acceptance in American society. Racial discrimination is certainly a factor, although the Haitian may also be resented by other ethnic minorities who view Haitians (like other immigrants and refugees) as taking jobs away from poor Americans. It is dangerous to assume that all American blacks will accept Haitian entrants, for often national and language differences have greater impact than racial similarities.

Even the one remaining support group---the existing Haitian communities in areas such as Miami and Brooklyn---experience some internal conflict because of the class differences that exist in Haiti. An educated, upper-class Haitian may feel sympathetic toward the peasant-class entrant, but it is unlikely that the two will feel they have very much in common or that one owes anything to the other. It is important, then, that the sponsor seeking support in the Haitian community be aware of these differences.

Some American are intimidated by Haitians' practice of Voodoo. This is usually not a problem, however, because any practice of Voodoo rituals usually takes place privately and will not affect American neighbors. However, a Voodoo priest in the community, if there is one, could provide considerable support to the Haitian experiencing emotional problems. Of course, Roman Catholicism is an important part of Haitian life and practicing that religion in the U.S. can provide additional stability and spiritual support to the entrant.

As with most refugee groups, language difficulties present numerous practical problems. These problems are compounded for those entrants who are nonliterate and do not have classroom experience. ESL classes are therefore an important part of a Haitian's adjustment to the U.S., and

entrants should be encouraged to attend such classes when available.

Haitian entrants, having come primarily from poverty-stricken rural areas, will need extensive orientation to life in the United States. They will probably be unfamiliar with American appliances, use of plumbing facilities, health and safety practices, laws, etc. Sponsors and service providers can take the same kinds of approaches to orientation as they do with many other refugee groups, remembering that Haitians may not be aware of things that Americans take for granted.

Like all refugees, Haitian entrants are likely to experience depression, culture shock, "survivor's guilt," and other emotional problems during their first several months or years in the U.S. This can be particularly painful for the entrant in a detention center. These problems are exacerbated by the on-going anxiety resulting from their uncertain legal status. (For further information on the social adaptation of refugees and entrants, see "A Guide for Social Adaptation," available from the Language and Orientation Resource Center.)

In spite of the problems Haitians encounter in the United States, the experience of those who have resettled thus far suggests that they have many strengths which enable them to adjust to and function within this society. One of these strengths is their great motivation to work in the U.S. Having faced extreme poverty and seeing no way to impact their own futures in Haiti, the entrants are highly motivated to succeed in the United States. They therefore tend to be extremely hard-working people. In addition, criminal behavior is almost unheard of; there have been very few reports of crimes committed by Haitians in this country. Americans who do get to know Haitians find that their values are quite similar and that Haitians have the potential to fit readily into American society.

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